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CURRICULUM MATERIALS FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION.

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THE AUTHOR PROPOSES THAT--(1) AN ADULT EDUCATION CURRICULUM SHOULD BE BASED ON SPECIFIC NEEDS, INTERESTS, ABILITIES, AND GOALS, (2) SPECIFICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM MATERIALS TO BE USED SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED BY THE PROJECT STAFF, AND (3) THERE IS LITTLE OR NO COMMERCIALLY AVAILABLE MATERIAL THAT WILL MEET THE ABOVE CRITERIA. GUIDELINES BY WHICH CURRICULUM MATERIALS MAY BE EVALUATED INCLUDE--(1) THE MATERIAL MUST RELATE TO THE GOAL OF THE LESSON AND THE LEARNING PROCESS, (2) THE MATERIAL MUST BE AT THE PROPER LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY TO INSURE SUCCESS, AND MUST PROGRESS IN DIFFICULTY AT A CHALLENGING PACE, (3) THE INTEREST LEVELS MUST BE APPROPRIATE, (4) THE MATERIAL MUST OFFER A VARIETY OF PRESENTATIONS, A RANGE OF PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES, AND HAVE A GENERALIZATION CAPABILITY, AND (5) THE MATERIAL MUST BE READILY AVAILABLE. (SF)

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CURRICULUM MATERIALS FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

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Curriculum Materials for Adult Basic Education

One of the great advantages we enjoy in working with most OEO educational projects is derived from the fact that they have, at most, only a peripheral relationship to existing public education programs. Thus, there is the potential, at least, for the development of learning experience having direct relevance to the individuals involved in them. This opportunity to give meaning to the term "education" at a time when, for many young Americans, public schools offer little more than a twelve-year exercise in futility is both a challenge and a responsibility. If we can, through the successful operation of meaningful adult education programs, demonstrate that learning has some measurable relationship to living, we may not only provide basic educational skills for adults but also take a first step toward restoring honor to the entire field of formal education.

The simple fact is, of course, that the public school systems of our nation as of this moment and for many years past have not met their responsibility of providing equal educational opportunity to all of our young. In good part this failure can be attributed to the rigidity and detachment from reality of many public school curriculum requirements. While it is true that much of the disillusionment felt by youngsters who have found their public educational experiences to be non-negotiable in the market-place of daily living can be traced directly to the "saber-tooth curriculum" designs governing what they are to learn, it is also true that curriculum content has been influenced to great extent by the nature of available teaching materials - particularly books and workbooks.

For many of the adult students, we see, this educational experience constitutes not only their first access to formal learning in decades but also the last chance to obtain basic literacy and computational skills that they may ever have. It clearly behooves us to assure that the curriculum in their program has immediate rather than historical significance.

The common goal, as I understand it, in most adult educational programs of the kind with which we are involved is to provide instruction and practice in what we might call "survival skills." We are attempting to "drownproof" those students through skill training which will allow them to stay on the surface of the economic sea which is variable in its buoyancy and dangerously unpredictable in its storms.

To do so successfully we must confine the training time to activities which will be readily perceived by the student as meaningful in his present existence as well as supportive to his attempts toward upward mobility. Since the circumstances, opportunities, interests, abilities, and prior experiences of the trainees vary widely within and among the various projects, it follows logically, that our educational responses must vary, often approaching common goals from quite different perspectives.

Because of this high degree of intra and inter-group differentiation, a generalized recommendation of any specific commercially prepared curriculum materials is, in my opinion, laden with disadvantages. The acquisition of curriculum materials, particularly when such acquisitions represent a significant budgetary item, dictates their use - even when it becomes subsequently clear that the materials obtained are ineffective or less effective than other materials might be.

In addition to introducing an undesirable rigidity into a program's operation, such materials often lead to reduced teacher effectiveness. The teacher who is required or pressured to use materials with which he is not comfortable or in which he does not believe is provided with an easy rationalization for his ineffectiveness. Further, by reducing his professional autonomy we reduce his feelings of professional adequacy - a move not calculated to encourage productive endeavor.

A further complicating factor in the selection of available commercially produced materials is the economic reality facing the producer. A certain guaranteed volume, varying with the nature and development cost - among other things - of the unit, must be anticipated if the publisher is to make a profit. Understandably, the publisher seeks to produce, therefore, material which has a general appeal.

For example, we still face a critical shortage of integrated reading materials. Publishers representatives tell me that this is due to the still restricted market for such materials. In the case of some of the presently available integrated materials the publisher had modified nothing more than the skin color of some of the characters in the illustrations, thus keeping production costs low for what is in many areas highly controversial material at best.

Even material prepared specifically for the education of poverty-class children or adults may be highly relevant in one sector while relatively meaningless in another. Bank Street Readers, for example, in the examples I have seen are oriented entirely toward big city life. Useful in inner-city schools they would be far less effective with rural migrants.

What I am suggesting thus far then might be summarized in three points:

First, curriculum should be based on the specific needs, interests, abilities, and goals of the particular project's population.

Second, specifications for curriculum materials to be used should be established by the project teaching staff with full understanding that there need not be conformity to a common curriculum materials list by all staff - even when such a list might be the production of a staff team.

Third, having established curriculum materials specifications based on a curriculum arriving from the nature and goals of the project participants the staff should not be surprised to discover that little or no commercially prepared materials are available which meet the specific project requirements.

To this point it may seem that I am advocating a total rejection of presently obtainable commercial materials. This is not my intent, although I do admit to a desire to emphasize the relative inadequacy - for most of our purposes - of much that is available. The issue at hand is not whether or not projects should use commercial materials but rather how and when. A further question that becomes immediately apparent is what do we use instead?

I believe there are really four options that we have in insuring an adequate supply of appropriate materials.

Before looking at those options, let's take a moment to set up some guidelines by which we might evaluate any curriculum materials, from whatever source.

First, the material must relate to the goal of the lesson in which it is to be used, as seen by the teacher.

Second, the material must relate to the goal of the learning process as seen by the student.

Third, the material must be at a level of difficulty which permits the student to enter into its use with assurance of success.

Fourth, the material must be so designed as to progress in difficulty at a pace which holds a challenge for the student while ensuring continued opportunity for success.

Fifth, the material must have an interest level commensurate with the social age of the student while having a difficulty level commensurate with the educational age of the student.

Sixth, the material must be physically attractive to the student, not only in an aesthetic sense but also in that it looks appropriate to the chronological age of the student.

Seventh, the material must hold an immediacy of impact for the student. He must find it easy to identify with the content and the illustrations.

Eighth, the material must offer a variety of presentations and a range of practice opportunities. Different students have different learning styles. Some will learn quickly and easily through auditory input. Others require visual input. Still others need kinesthetic experiences. Some will learn only when they have a multi-sensory learning exposure.

Ninth, the material must have a generalization capability. For example, filling out job application forms might be part of a lesson which contained aspects of job skill training, language arts training, and social studies training - depending on how you define each topic. But, whatever the name of the lesson the use of a diversity of form increases the breadth of learning experience and raises the probability that the student will carry out general concepts to the real application he may eventually face. Ideally, of course, such practice should be undertaken with samples of real job applications from employers within the project area.

Tenth, and finally, the material must be readily available in quantities permitting distribution to each individual wherever it is economically feasible - and it more often is than current practice indicates.

I'm sure that most of you have additional or perhaps different criteria that you employ. I suggest these as possible points of departure which my own experience has shown to be worthwhile. I'm hopeful that individual project staffs would go considerably beyond these guidelines in setting up their own specifications, particularly as relates to their own goals and capabilities.

One further point on this question of staff capabilities as they affect choice of curriculum materials. An old saw in the field of education is that well-ordered, closely structured curriculum materials can serve as a useful crutch to an inadequately qualified teacher. I'm not at all as sure of that as I once was.

While I wouldn't disagree with the assumption that such materials may, for a time, make a marginal teacher look good I don't believe that they make him more effective in most cases. Rather, I find just the opposite occurring in many instances. For example, I've seen teachers who were quite ineffective in a regular classroom when required to use materials they did not feel comfortable with, become highly effective when encouraged in a special project, to select and use materials with which they felt competent.

What of the four options I mentioned a few moments ago? Where do we find the materials we need to teach adults basic education?

First, of course, there will be some materials that are readily available commercially that will meet all or most of the project staffs' specifications. Staff members should be permitted and encouraged to select and order such materials.

Second, there will be a somewhat larger selection - in most cases - of commercial materials that will be useful in certain ways to certain teachers. These, too, should be purchased at the request of the individual teacher.

Third, there will be some materials developed by individual staff members that may have general applicability to the project. Such materials should be evaluated by the same criteria as are commercially available materials and, when found suitable, be produced locally either by project staff or through local commercial sources.

And fourth, there will be a continuing need for teacher-made materials, specific to her area and to her class of the moment.

It is to these last two options - staff-produced and teacher-produced materials - that I would like to turn in the remaining portion of this paper.

One of the most common weaknesses, in my judgment, in most of the educational projects with which I am familiar - including, I regret to say, a few in which I've had some responsibility for the design - has been the total absence of staff and facilities for the production of in-project teaching materials. In many projects, of course, individual teachers have produced

material that has been of substantial value to them in their teaching. In some fewer instances, such material has been distributed among other members of the project staff.

In general, however, most teachers are reluctant to invest in exploratory attempts toward the production of their own materials - particularly when there is no concrete evidence of support for such efforts within the staff hierarchy.

I'm suggesting here that a curriculum media specialist should hold a high priority in the staffing process at the planning stages and operation phases of a project. However, I realize that such a suggestion may have little practical application for most of us as concerns our current project involvements. This need not mean that staff and individual teacher production of materials must await some future projects.

Many teachers now working in projects with which we are associated have the capability to make significant creative contributions through a greater use of teacher-made materials, given some encouragement and guidance.

Let's take a specific example:

In a project I visited some time ago, not the one to which I'm currently attached, the adult class was droning painfully away at the task of reading in cast-off, sadly bedraggled elementary school first grade readers. It was a bit difficult to tell whether the teacher or her students were nearer death from boredom but the picture of bright-eyed, bushy-tailed learning just wasn't to be seen.

The problem, as is often the case, was to inject some feeling of identification into the actions, as well as to offer the students materials which were not pre-labeled as degrading in their childishness.

We took a camera as a basic tool and proceeded to build experience-type reading materials around pictures. First, since the most interesting sight to most of us is an image of ourself, we took individual pictures of each student and developed a short, high interest, low difficulty story for each one using class discussion as the development vehicle.

From there we moved into photo-stimulated language development in reading, writing, and talking. For example, the same picture of a scene or building or person familiar to all the students might be used to develop an experience chart type reading lesson, an exercise in creative writing, or a lively class discussion - or all three.

Using photographs, it is possible to take students out of the classroom and into their own community without turning one wheel on the bus. It is possible to multiply the facts of motivation, produce high interest, non-insulting material which is geared to one, two, three, or a dozen different ability levels, and do so while insuring that the materials are directly and immediately relevant to training goals.

This is but one of a variety of techniques for developing teacher-made or project staff-made materials. The important thing, I believe - and by far the most important thing - is to insure that whatever materials we use are relevant to our curriculum goals - and to the students who are the reason for the involvement of all of us.

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